Why it's important to talk about class? IS Because of the consequences that may arise if you don't …

Introduction.

Aspirational Beauty: *Backgrounds and Backdrops the Staging of Class.*
Wallflowers and Wallpaper: A Case Study

My contribution to Classification is to present an overview of my practice research, which is the concept of Aspirational Beauty. I'm going to give a brief insight into how my practice as a 'painter', has led my research and will provide two examples, or case studies of this process. (Both drawn out from photographs)

The concept of *Aspirational Beauty* is to understand creative endeavors and practices that are outside of, or marginalized from, established theoretical conventions and definitions. *Aspirational Beauty* is, I argue, a creative resistance to conforming to socially inscribed ideals of respectability. My PhD thesis, from which this presentation is drawn, considers *Aspirational Beauty* as an aesthetic resistance to class shame and a reaction to ascribed and legitimate routes of attaining cultural capital, personified by painting, the most aristocratic of art forms.

Life writing at the intersection of class and feminist politics is the framework used to position my understanding of *Aspirational Beauty*. The concept of *Aspirational Beauty* is traced and articulated through a process of writing through multidisciplinary perspectives that incorporate and link painting, history, material culture, literature, sociology and fine art practice. The concept of *Aspirational Beauty* is to understand creative endeavors and

practices that are outside of, or marginalized from, established theoretical conventions and definitions. *Aspirational Beauty* is, I argue, a creative resistance to conforming to socially inscribed ideals of respectability. My research considers *Aspirational Beauty* as an aesthetic resistance to class shame and a reaction to ascribed and legitimate routes of attaining cultural capital, personified by painting, the most aristocratic of art forms. I have considered my practice-as-research, exploring overt transformations of shame in relation to vulnerability and beautification within my practice as a painter. I unravel habitual acts of concealment and aesthetic cover-ups and how this function's as a veneer of respectability.

Introduction**: *In the Picture:*** Repeat Patterns

Detached from the binding and protection of the family album and presented in its own individual, cream, cardboard sleeve, fixed by four small corner incisions, is a small black and white photograph of my mother as a young girl. The photograph was taken when my mother was six years old. She was born in 1947; a period when more children were born than ever before in recorded history, often referred to as the 'bulge'. The

photograph was taken at the local infant school and the date on the back is 1953, the Coronation year of Queen Elizabeth II, who was born in 1926, the same year as my mother's mother.

There is a great deal of scholarly investigation relating to contemporary understandings of the critical positioning of domestic and twentieth century popular photography. Val Williams investigations identified photographic representations of the family as idealized:

> Snapshots mirrored family life as it ought to be, or as what we would wish it to be. Carefully coded, they acted as a talisman against the real.[1]

Williams's quotation provides me with a model of how I interpret my mother's photograph. Drawing upon the method of life writing, the fiction in the photograph is identified and examined.[2] Annette Kuhn writes that:

> In order to show what it is evidence of, a photograph must always point you away from itself … To evoke memories that might have little if nothing to do with what is actually in the picture.[3]

In Kuhn's analysis of the relationship between family life and its photographic representation, she recognizes an apparent discrepancy arising from the disparity of what appears to be in the picture, and the reality of events that surround it. I consider the apparent reality conveyed by my photographs and it enables me to address more accurately what it is that they conceal. Val Williams' 'talisman against the real'[4] is thus interrogated and related to the *appearance* of making those depicted, respectable. The

[1] V, Williams, C, Brown & B, Lardinois, *Who's Looking at the Family?*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1994, p. 13.
[2] Life writing and its specific relevance to my investigation is clarified in chapter two.
[3] Kuhn, op. cit., p. 18.
[4] Williams, op. cit., p. 18.

consequence of this is that the visceral experience of working-class life remains hidden from view.

School children in England in the 1950s were encouraged to write with their right hand, regardless of natural inclination. This I have been told by both of my left-handed parents, and it may explain why my mother is holding the pen hesitantly in her non-writing hand. A second possibility is that the photographer has posed her this way for a better composition; to position the hands the other way around would make the 'natural' pose look a little awkward. If this latter pretension is the case, we can assume that the photograph is a little false, a bit of a set-up. The point of this example is that the photograph attempts to hide this fact, in an act of visual manipulation, to present a more acceptable image of conformity. Children, as Patricia Holland explains, are in no position to have much say in how they are 'pictured'.[5] She also claims that regardless of who actually took the photograph the importance of such an image is that it accounts not only for the lives of ordinary people but also for their fantasies.[6] My grandparents would have paid for the photograph because it perfectly portrays their daughter, as they would have wished her to be seen. My grandmother was obsessive about cleanliness and her hands were very dry from being constantly in and out of water.[7] The keeping up of the outward appearance of things was very important to my grandmother. The relationship of my grandmother, as the commissioner of the photograph sets up my grandmother as the

[5] P, Holland, 'Sweet it is to Scan...: Personal Photographs and Popular Photography', in L, Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, Great Britain, 2004, p. 117.
[6] ibid.
[7] J, Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p. 443. Jonathan Rose references cleanliness in working class homes. He considers how 'generations of British working-class women had waged a relentless class struggle against dirt …With a coal-fire economy there was a perpetual drizzle of soot and grime.' He importantly reminds us that for those who had spent their lives 'doing dirty work, cleanliness was a radical affirmation of self-respect.'

author of my mother's image. The relationship between my grandmother and my mother, and the formation of social presentation through the photographic image, the complexity of actual and representational realities, provides an introduction to one of the central themes of my research. Reading between the images, actual and fabricated realities identify the role of concealment as an enforced response to achieving respectability in reference to class and shame.

Beverly Skeggs, writing in *Formations of Class and Gender,* considers that there are shared subconscious perceptions and limitations to social mobility. Skeggs uses the term *Structures of Feeling,* to define feelings that manifest themselves as a form of shame best described as not quite measuring up to expectations.[8] The picture that my mother finds herself in depicts the rural 'English' countryside. The backdrop is constructed using domestic wallpaper, which appears to be commercially manufactured and conforms to a repeat pattern.

Patricia Holland examines the history of the photographic backdrop, writing that:

> Studio portraitists introduced painted backdrops so that the customers, whatever their social standing, could choose to place themselves within dignified parklands, seascapes, conservatories or palm houses.[9] The designer of my mother's wallpaper backdrop appears to have been inspired as much by depictions of an idealised English rural scene as by the aesthetic tastes of the aristocracy.

[8] B, Skeggs, Formations of Class and Gender, through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 4-5.
[9] Holland, op. cit., *Sweet it is to Scan,* p. 126.

The choice of wallpaper as the backdrop for my mother's school photograph initially seems insignificant, however the importance of this domestic covering in relation to constructing a respectable picture of childhood has both moral and historical precedents. Through the late nineteenth and middle of the twentieth century the negative consequences of a child's surroundings were a serious preoccupation. Concern was widely shared by a diverse section of society, from philanthropic and state sponsored reformers to artists, scientists, and writers. During this period a beautiful environment was considered a prerequisite to producing better people, while, in contrast, ugliness was perceived as a determinant of deviancy.[10] Wallpaper, 'a furnishing that literally surrounds'[11] was used succinctly by Oscar Wilde to articulate the importance of an aesthetic environment on the development of young people. In his lecture *The Decorative Arts,* delivered as part of his North American tour (1882) he wrote:

> Why, I have seen wallpaper which must lead a boy brought up under its influence to a career of crime; you should not have such incentives lying about your drawing rooms.[12]

Writing in 1995, John Frow proposes that it is useful to think of class as a process 'played out through particular institutional forms and balances of power ... through desires, and fears, and fantasies'.[13] My consideration of class is in relation to how it is

[10] D, Mao, *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860-1960,* Princeton University Press, United States of America, 2008, p. 35. The concept of environment central to the English deployment of the term was defined as meaning 'the conditions under which any person or thing lives or is developed; the sum-total of influences which modify and determine the development of life or character'.
[11] ibid., p. 3.
[12] O, Wilde, *Decorative Arts lecture, North American Tour*, 1882, cited in D, Mao, *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860-1960*, Princeton University Press, United States of America, 2008. The quotation forms the introduction to the publication, Fateful Beauty, by American author Mao. The audience would have understood it as a condensed thesis of the importance of an aesthetic environment in the shaping of the 'characters' of the young. The joke depends 'partly … upon the incongruous pairing of working-class destiny with middle-class milieu, of criminal career with drawing room furniture'.
[13] J, Frow, 'Cultural Studies and Cultural Value', 1995, in B, Skeggs, *The Making of Class and Gender Through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2005, p. 111.

perceived, and acted upon via my framework as an artist. Through life writing I seek an interpretation of the consequences of class as felt and lived, beyond the idea of the purely personal, to include concepts and procedures that can be used to understand that, what we call autobiographical, is to a large extent historically and culturally determined.

Although the working classes were complicit in having their photographs taken when photography became affordable, the way that they portrayed themselves was as respectable aspiring, middle class subjects. In relation to such photographs, Patricia Holland claims that any real sense of 'working class identity is absent'.[14] She further explains that those living in particularly poor conditions were the least likely to have taken or to keep photographs that reflected the reality of their daily lives and activities. That's why we have so little information about them.

The school photograph portrays an imagined inheritance of all that is good and unquestionably English, the intersection of class, nation and property as portrayed by the chosen backdrop, a scene that could be considered in the tradition of the 'picturesque'.[15] In his book, *In a Dream of England,* John Taylor claims that such scenes could only be appreciated by a viewer with 'good taste', only available to, or gained through, 'education in the ways of certain classes'.[16] The central prop in the school photograph introduces this issue of class and education; the illustrated book that my mother covets provides a reference to learning, history, and heritage. But it is just a prop and I doubt it

[14] Holland, op. cit., *Sweet it is to Scan*, p. 133.
[15] W, Gilpin, *An Essay upon Prints, containing Remarks upon the Principles of picturesque Beauty…* London, 1768, cited in W, D, Templeman, 'Thoreau, Moralist of the Picturesque', *PMLA*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1932, pp. 864 – 889, accessed 26 April 2011, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004859666.0001.000/1:6?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
[16] J, Taylor, *In a Dream of England*, *Photography: Critical Views*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994, p. 17.

would have provided the knowledge required to *see* the reality of her landscape material, social or otherwise.[17]

[17] ibid. As Taylor further explains, this appreciation 'was not open to everyone: it was a privilege enjoyed by the gentry, who understood both art and touring'. This is further elaborated by W, Burton, in his transcript *The Scenery-Shower, with Word-Paintings of the Beautiful, the Picturesque, and the Grand in Nature*, cited in W, D, Templeman, 'Thoreau, Moralist of the Picturesque', *PMLA*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1932, pp. 864-867 in his 'lecture [performed] before the American Institute of Instruction, 1841, Burton observes that some of his contemporaries, either by their very nature or by virtue of 'fortunate early education', have always had a proper sensitivity to landscape beauty. These people 'scarcely remember the time when their souls were not pleasurably alive to the beauty, picturesque ness, and grandeur of nature. Many people, however, have failed to acquire this new sensibility of gratification at landscape beauty. Their failure has not come from lack of ability, but from lack of having their attention specifically directed in the proper way.'

The lie of the Land

I visited Catherine's Palace in Pushkin, a suburb of St. Petersburg one early morning in November 2004. En route I had passed people who were obviously living in their cars, a striking contrast to the opulent bejeweled interiors I was to witness. I took photographs of the drapery and the icing sugar plasterwork embedded with ornate porcelain, and the sumptuously laid tables heaving with displays of ceramic fruit and other replica produce. Piled high, everything was designed as an elaborate display of abundance. One of the photographs I took still captivates me. Taken in the Chinese blue drawing room of the palace, where my flash had unexpectedly gone off, the photograph is of a painting of a rather strange figure staring out from a small canvas. The painting

would not command attention for its competency or great dexterity of paint application, scale or fine composition. It is rather small and odd. It was not, however, a close up of the painting that I wanted to capture within my photograph, but the grouping, the installation of the painting on the background of an imaginary rural landscape rendered by means of beautiful and elaborately hand-painted silk wallpaper. The oil painting hangs on the painted wallpaper that in turn conceals a secret door. These elements are bought together in one of my photographs which I call *Lay of the Land.*[18] The photograph as presented is an invention:

> Invention– Is a technical term of classical rhetoric meaning not the faculty of making things up, but of finding them: the act of discovering and combining the materials from which an argument could most effectively be constructed.[19]

The term invention, clarifies my process and approach to making paintings and writing. It considers the importance of making sense of what is available within the framework of a lived experience and of the encounters with objects, artefacts, people and places, invention is driven by visual curiosity and valuing the process of observation.

The details of the origins of the small oil painted portrait were not displayed in the palace, there was no interpretation panel available or information concerning the artist that had painted it. Further investigation revealed that an earlier painting hanging in another Russian palace provides information that is helpful in speculating about its provenance. This earlier painting hangs in the Grand Peterhof Palace and depicts the

[18] A, Room, (revised), *Brewers Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Millennium Edition, London, Cassell & Co, 2000, p. 682. *Lay of the land*. The use of Lay is grammatically incorrect but is commonly used, it is grammatically correct to use Lie as in 'The lie of the land' which means 'the way the land lies'. Lay is a verb inviting misuse. The similarity of meaning between the verbs compounds the confusion. The confusion in grammatical terms adds to my interest in this image in relation to it not being quite right.

19 F, J, Kenney, *Ovid*, *Metamorphoses*, Oxford Worlds Classic, Oxford, 1986, p. 1.

young princess Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1762), the future Empress Elizabeth of Russia, as the mythological figure Venus.[20] The Venus painting is by the artist Louis Caravaque who was born and trained in France.[21] According to Lindsey Hughes it was only during the Petrine era that instances of the female nude appeared in the figurative arts in Russia. In her essay, *From Caftans into Corsets* she mentions a number of remarkable paintings depicting Peter the Greats daughters, by the court painter Louis Car a vaque. She describes them as follows: Anna and Elizabeth as nymphs in diaphanous, nipple-exposing versions of court dress and another of the young Elizabeth reclining muse-like in the nude.[22] On first considering this type of depiction of Russian nobility the proposition seems incongruous, particularly as there were no examples of the female nude previously depicted in Russian art before this period. However, this does identify the difference of approach and intention of the commissioner of the painting, in this case Peter the Great. Contrary to my mother's photograph there was no need for conformity in relation to portraying his daughters as respectable. In the context of the commissioning of a court painter, the choice of depicting his young daughter as the naked Venus only makes sense in relation to his *perception* of the superiority of artistry imported from the West, as part of his ambitions for Westernizing Russia.[23] By depicting his children, he was positioning

[20] R, Bolton (ed.), *The Collectors: Old Master Paintings*, Sphinx Books, London, 2009, p. 44. Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1762) reigned as Tsarina of Russia from 1741 until her death. She was famed for her beauty as well as 'a love of material excess and spectacle'. She was the second daughter of Peter I the Great and Catherine I and was a passionate supporter of the Russian arts and founded the Moscow University (1755) and the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg (1758).
[21] ABC Gallery, *Louis Caravaque (1684-1754)*, accessed 01 May 2011, <http://www.abcgallery.com/R/rossika/caravaquebio.html>. 'He came to Russia on the invitation of Peter I. Caravaque lived and worked in Russia for 40 years until his death in 1754'. Caravaque painted portraits, landscapes, battle scenes and made sketches for tapestry manufacture.
[22] L, Hughes, 'From Caftans into Corsets: The Sartorial Transformation of Women During the Reign of Peter the Great', in I, Barta, *Gender and Sexuality in Russian Civilization, (Studies in Russian and European Literature)*, Routledge, 2001, p. 18. Hughes' essay documents how, during Peter's reign the clothing of the Russian nobility was remoulded in the image of the West by decree, 1700-01. She suggests that depictions of the nude were an example of this Western import, with the 'unclad female form relegated to allegory's'.
[23] L, Hughes, op. cit., p.18.

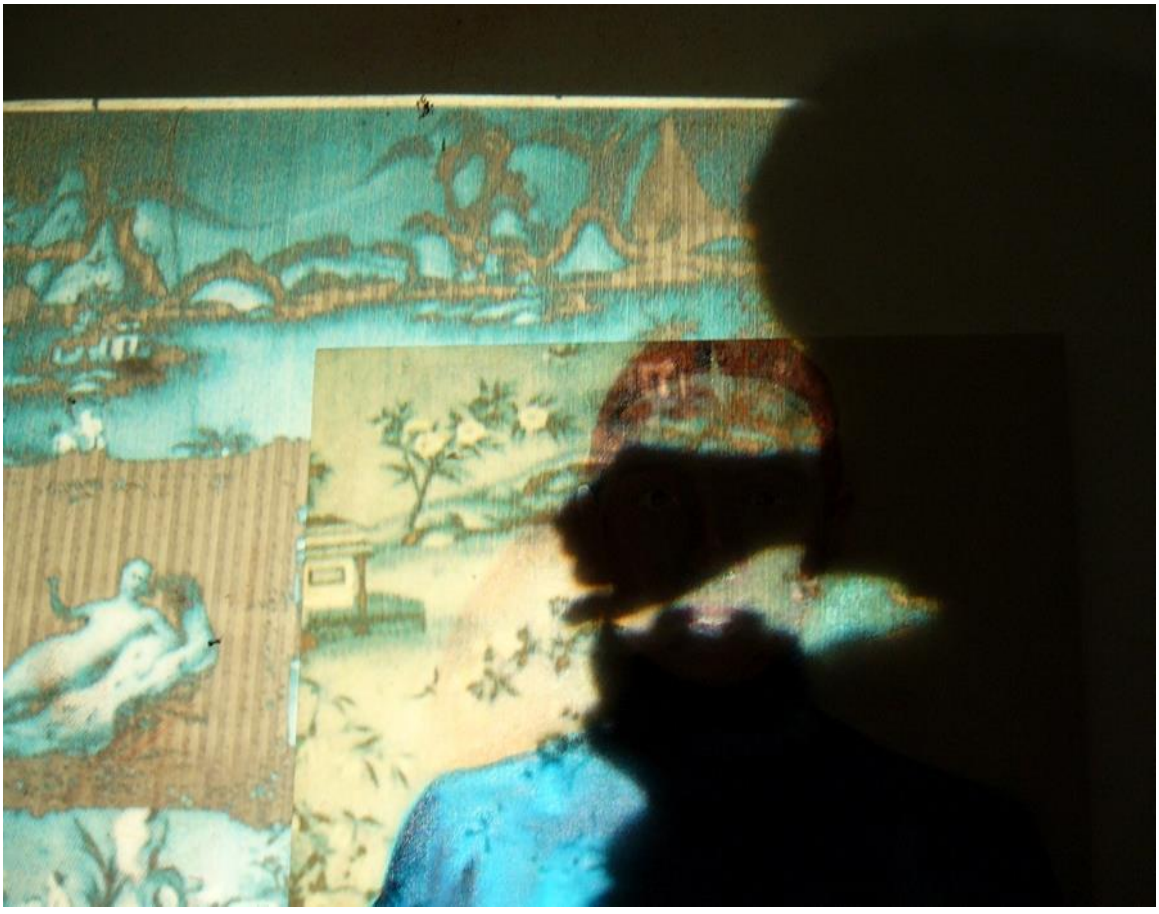
them within a superior Western tradition of art. In the painting (Fig. 2) Elizabeth is depicted as an idealized and pure goddess, untainted by the vulgarities of everyday life. The relationship between the framed, figurative painting and the wallpaper on which it hangs is odd, is this the way it was originally hung on so pictorial a backdrop? A closer inspection of the photograph reveals that the wallpaper panels have been pasted over a door in a bid to conceal it, so that it becomes a secret door. Concealed doors are a usual occurrence in palaces and grand houses where the doors conceal hidden routes through the building, which serviced the activity of a multitude of servants, allowing duties to be carried out efficiently and unobtrusively.

> One of the most revealing aspects of the house at any period is the placement of stairs (or the lack of them). The stairs are indicative of the way life was carried on indoors. Take, for example, the introduction of back stairs during the seventeenth century, as a 'revolutionary invention'. Owing to this improvement, we are told, the gentry walking up the stairs no longer met their last night's faeces coming down them. Servants no longer bedded down in the drawing room, or outside their master's door or in a truckle bed at his feet. They became, if not invisible, very much less visible.[24]

The more I consider this photograph the more it compels me to make it a starting point for a piece of work because, like the photograph of my mother, it relies upon class invisibility, in this instance the invisibility of those people who serve the ruling class.

[24] M, Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1978, cited in J, Riley*, Review: Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1979, pp. 400-403, accessed 26 April 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2738516>.

Case study one: *The studio.*



My fascination compelled me to do something more with the photograph, which I took back to my studio in London. I scanned it into my computer and printed the photograph in various sizes. I materially attempted to perform my own reconstruction of the photograph of the painting on top of the wallpaper that concealed the door. I made repeated attempts to reproduce it as a contemporary painting. I have made transparencies of the photograph, which I projected life size. I inverted the image, made it black and white and shifted and changed the colour balance. In the darkness of the studio with the sound of humming from the overhead projector and the smell of burning dust I physically entered in to the frame of the projected photograph, alas my silhouette, which blocks the projection and casts a shadow, only removes the image further from me. I have tenderly traced the projected light with multiple layers of oil paint, attempted to pin down the figures in the make-believe landscape and to re render the reclining framed figure. Why isn't it working? The monumentally large canvas betrays months of work, my epic endeavor. The large unfinished canvas protrudes from my painting rack, it is covered in a large sheet of bubble wrap but I know it still has a hold on my imagination. In my attempt to reconstruct this photograph as a large-scale painting I became stuck, the painting became dirty and dry from over working. It then occurred to me that maybe this photograph is the reverse image of my mother's school photograph, with the class relations in reverse. The painting I wanted to make from the photograph in order to include myself had already been made *in* the actual photograph. *Lay of the Land* reveals the hidden door, which, as a working class-woman I stand behind in my identification

with the Russian servants. My attempts in the studio to reconstruct the photograph as a painting were redundant before I began. I can't make the painting; the process is merely an attempt of a figuration of what I am going to call aspirational beauty. Why I am so engaged with this image as a painting, I realise, is that painting is the cultural capital that I want.

Conclusion.

Much of my research has addressed a consideration of class and the importance of how we are positioned in relation to it. I want to be clear that I have never wished to escape my class, just to acknowledge it, and own it, so that I can also understand the processes of class to be able to interrupt and challenge them. When making work I attempt to register the constructive aspects of my class position. Other women also consider the positive nature of their working-class identities, which contradicts the view that the only positive choice is to escape from them. The positive aspects for me particularly as an artist include an ability to be inventive with limited resources, and to envisage the positive possibilities in the mundane. The ability to be playful with different cultural classed references, and the ability to speak with a rich, ambiguous vocabulary that can be both vulgar and eloquent.

In historical terms painting may be interpreted as aristocratic but it is also a messy activity; it is dirty, fluid, and abject. Moreover, as the historian Leonore Davidoff writes 'battles with dirt are class divisive activities. Dirt and waste, sexuality and contagion, danger and disorder, degeneracy and pathology, became the moral evaluations by which

the working class were coded and became known and are still reproduced today'.[25] It is the actual base material of paint, not a consideration of the formal appearance of paintings that excites me. The very nature of oil paint is that it is dirty, smelly and fluid. I may not have control over how my class has previously been coded, or how my work is perceived, but it is the possibilities of this base material of paint that for my practice presents the most radical possibilities for the eloquent transformations of mess and disorder.

[25] L, Davidoff, 'The Rationalization of Housework,' *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, pp. In a review of this book by Professor Mary Chamberlain, for History In Focus, she links the 'function of domesticity, … to impos[ing] order on disorder, to transform the anarchy of raw material into acceptable cultural artifacts, to maintain the boundaries between nature and civilization. Which is pertinent to my practice as an artist and my heritage, and to the lives of my ancestors, as domestic servants. Accessed 02 September 2012. <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Gender/chamber.html>.